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ABSTRACT

A middle school teacher describes the process by which she discovered a collaborative approach to teaching writing to a class including English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) students. To create a meaningful writing experience, she had students prepare a personal narrative, starting by having the class generate endings to the sentence beginning "I'll never forget the first time I..." Each student was then asked to think about their special moment and remember every detail, then placed in collaborative groups with at least two ESL and two mainstream students in each, and asked to tell their story to group members. Remaining group members filled out a story plan worksheet, then shared their notes and asked questions, helping the storyteller refine and sequence details. Each student then wrote a first draft of his story. Students were paired, as much as possible, in ESL/mainstream student dyads to further develop their stories as partners. The experience served to reduce ESL students' anxiety greatly, promote exchange of ideas and feedback, help develop relationships between students across cultural boundaries, foster student self-esteem, and develop individual accountability. Contains seven references. (MSE)

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Teaching Narrative Writing Through the Collaborative Funnel

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One of the most difficult tasks I experience as a middle school language arts instructor is teaching narrative writing to my mainstream English as a Second Language students. Narrative writing by nature incorporates story elements of setting, plot, characterization, and theme which neither persuasive nor expository writing do. Consequently attempting to guide ESL students to gel these components effectively is frustrating for everyone. So last year in order to create a meaningful writing experience for all my students, I opted for writing personal narratives. Personal narratives allow students to write their own stories about a specific moment in their lives. Moreover, encouraging ESL students to speak and write about their lives helps facilitate language acquisition since they are writing about what they know best, themselves. (Gersten, 1986). Yet, I was still in a quandary as to how I was going to ease my ESL students' anxiety regarding such a seemingly overwhelming project.

Wanting a common thread to run through each student's story without squashing individuality, as a class, we brainstormed endings to the following sentence beginning, "I'll never forget

the first time I ..." I can not begin to list the precious moments students wrote on the easel at the front of the room. Two sheets of paper full of possible topics appeared in just ten short minutes. Little did I realize that this initial classroom activity was Phase I of a collaborative funnel through which my students' personal narratives would be born, take shape, develop, and emerge.

Using the class generated list as a springboard, I instructed each student to choose and zero in on their very special first time by just thinking about and remembering every detail of it. Once the students crystallized their precious moments in their memories, I put them in groups of four making sure each group has two ESL students and two mainstream education students. These collaborative groups became Phase II of my funnel. Each student in each group orally told his or her story to the group. While listening very carefully, the remaining group members filled in a story plan sheet. They listed details about where and when the story took place, all the people who participated in it, the three main events that made up its plot, and the emotions of the storyteller during the story. After the student finished telling his or her story, the other group members shared what they had heard and asked questions for

clarification. This oral exchange helped the storyteller sequence and refine details so that when he or she wrote the story, anyone reading it would understand it.

Once everyone in the group orally shared his or her experience the students eagerly wrote their first drafts , using the plan sheets as guides. As I observed them, I saw confident faces reflecting heartfelt pride through occasional smiles. The plan sheets helped students organize their stories by making sure they accidentally did not omit any important details.

When everyone finished writing his or her rough draft, I subdivided the original groups of four into groups of two. In as many cases as possible, I paired a mainstream student with an ESL student. These pairs formed Phase III of the collaborative funnel. Now it was time to share again and further develop their stories. The students exchanged stories and read each other's aloud. This gave each writer an opportunity to critique and revise his or her story based on its sound. Often students do not take the opportunity to listen to their work so many errors go unnoticed. This method provided individual feedback as well as that of a partner. Consequently, the students discovered and corrected many syntactical and organizational errors more easily. Moreover the concept of shared experience continued resulting in

a bond formed between ESL and mainstream students. Students working as partners eventually led to individual success.

Finally the day of reckoning came when every student turned in his or her memorable first. Hence, Phase IV of the collaborative funnel occurred, emergence. As the students zestfully handed in their stories, I saw victory in their bright shiny eyes, triumphant smiles filled the classroom, and if I listened real closely, I heard whisperings saying, "Read mine first. It's the best!" To some this might not seem like a big deal; but for my students especially my ESL students, it was a big deal. They had overcome their fear and anxiety of showing and telling a snapshot of their lives in front of their mainstream peers. Instead, they willingly zeroed in on a special moment, openly shared it with their peers who helped them give it shape, developed it further with a friend, and finally let it emerge on its own merit. For the ESL student, this is risk taking at its best.

By using a collaborative method opposed to individualization, several benefits came to light. First, my mainstream ESL students' anxiety was greatly reduced. Imagine how it must feel for a Hispanic, Asian, or Arabic child to sit in a mainstream classroom where everyone reads, writes, and speaks

English relatively easily. Writing a story to a mainstream child might not prove to be much of a problem; but for an ESL student, it can be overwhelming. He or she already senses the tension to try to compete on an impossible academic level. Thus, the classroom brainstorming technique broke the ice making it possible for the ESL students to generate ideas freely with everyone else. There were no right or wrong answers just ideas, anybody's ideas. Stephen Krashen believes negative influences such as anxiety, lack of self-confidence, and inadequate motivation to speak a second language retard acquisition (Crawford, 1993). Therefore minimizing their anxiety was crucial if they were to be successful. They felt comfortable writing their ideas on the easel because I accepted everyone's ideas equally. When visualizing a funnel, one sees a wide entrance of welcome and luckily so did they. Hence Phase I became the birth of their ideas.

Once all my students decided about what to write, I invited them to share in small collaborative groups. Why? Why didn't I just have them begin writing? I wanted to enhance everyone's security and to experience culture. Remember every group consisted of two ESL students and two mainstream students. The cultural exchange was unbelievable. As I circulated among the

groups, students shared stories ranging from the tooth fairy's first visit to first visits to Mexico where grandma uses insects in recipes. According to S. Ana Garza, education can never be in a culture-free environment (Garza, 1991). Based on the shared experiences in my classroom, I wholeheartedly agree. Everyone was learning about culture, even me. I found myself as intrigued by my students' tales as their fellow group members. I felt drawn to their storytelling like a nail to a magnet; and like their fellow group members, I, too, asked a lot of questions. By answering so many questions, my students' stories slowly took shape within the organizational framework provided by their plan sheets in a culturally driven environment. Moreover the small collaborative groups created a safe haven to exchange ideas and either add or subtract details necessary to make their story easy to understand and special. Thus, Phase II of the collaborative funnel became slightly narrower while retaining a protective aura.

Oral sharing occurred again after the students' completed their rough drafts. Now it was time to more fully develop their stories. Rather than have each student read his or her story to a partner, partners exchanged stories and took turns reading to one another. Often I observed my students identifying

syntactical errors by listening for them. Earlier, I instructed them that if a sentence sounds incorrect, than it probably is. This does not happen in all cases; but in many instances such as subject-verb agreement, correct use of adjective and adverb degrees, and pronoun usage, it can. Moreover, students had the opportunity to hear their stories read aloud read by someone else and to listen for words accidentally left out or a detail that was out of sync with the story's plot. In addition, constructive criticism resulted between partners. Phase III of my collaborative funnel approach soon took on the form of an intimate informal writers' workshop, an opportunity for students to share their writing with their peers and receive feedback to help them with revision (Farnan, 1993). My teaching experience told me that students have their own mode of communication that far surpasses mine. Consequently, opening two-way calling via pair share collaboration proved to be a good venue to pursue. It was during this phase that their stories developed fully, and fine tuning occurred. Once through this part of the funnel, final drafts loomed on the linguistic horizon.

The time to turn in their stories was a time to celebrate, a time to eagerly anticipate, rather than a time to dread and worry about a grade. The students' successfully written stories

emerged through the narrow end of the funnel because of the collaborative efforts of all.

My students accomplished more than writing about a specific moment in time. They developed better relationships which broke through cultural barriers and fostered greater self-esteem (Wood, 1994). Although each student was held individually accountable, the peer collaboration made such accountability less threatening. Rather than individual accountability being the assessment element of cooperation, it was the reason for it. Frequently after a traditional cooperative learning experience, students are asked to demonstrate their own understanding of a concept by some means of performance such as a test, essay, or oral presentation. However, the collaborative funnel approach broke tradition by focusing on individual accountability from beginning to end. In so doing, no student could fall through the cracks by riding on someone else's coattails which sometimes occurs during cooperative learning experiences. Everyone knew from the beginning that he or she would be responsible for writing a personal narrative, but using one another to help made the task more fun.

Today's teacher must continually find ways to meet academic challenges while fostering a sense of community within as well as

outside the classroom (Wood, 1992). Collaboration is a teaching modality enabling teachers to incorporate their students' home cultures into the classroom while still addressing the linguistic demands of all (Houlton, 1986).

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